December 2011. 0746 hours. 7:46 A.M. in civilian time. The weather is frigid and unforgiving. As usual I forgot my jacket in the car. Briefly I consider a 30 second trip back to the car, but quickly dismiss that idea as ludicrous, such a shocking degree of delirium merely a side effect of the weather and the freezing of my ass. I have come to far back down now. These are the times that try men’s’ souls, I think to myself. Perseverance is key.

But the noble individuals here are well conditioned for what they are about to encounter. In the land of chaos, one learns to forgo all previous notions of what constitutes reality. In a few moments, pandemonium will inevitably set in. At this point, I’m all too familiar with the harrowing scenario. The weak will succumb to the circus-like atmosphere, and only the strong will prevail.

Standing next to me is Alex, a quiet man of about 20 years. Alex’s breath is of the worst variety known to man: Red Bull. But as many man familiar with the horrors war will confess, it takes a certain level of courage to stand on the front lines, albeit it non-alcoholic-breath-killing liquid courage. Questions of hygiene should not considered at a time like this. Alex is reluctant to say much at first, aside from the obligatory head nod, a required staple in the black community. But with damn near another hour to kill before the proverbial shit hits the fan in full form, he starts to warm up to me, and for brief yet blissful moments, the lack of warmness in my ass is alleviated by the warming of this stranger’s disposition. Apparently, Alex has landed himself in some trouble as of late. His ex-girlfriend, whom he impregnated at the age of fifteen, is threatening to sue for child support. He works two dead-end jobs to at Wal-Mart and a Shell Gas Station to pay for food, gas, and night classes at Pulaski Tech.

“And to top it all off,” he says. “My mother won’t stop bitching at me. I had to move back in with her a few months back. Everyday it’s the same old shit, man. She’s always bitching about something, everything, telling me to get my life together and all that shit. I’m working two jobs and going to school, what else does she want?”

This outburst of emotion is not lost on me, but despite these pressing matters, there is something on the mind of Alex that takes all precedence. In fact, it is the reason that the both of us, along with close to a hundred other delusional people, have been standing in line at the Park Plaza Mall in the wee hours of the morning.

To purchase a new pair of Air Jordans.

Michael Jordan was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1963 to James and Deloris Jordan. After spending his first few years of life in Brooklyn, the Jordan family jumped ship to Wilmington, North Carolina, the state Jordan is most identified with other than Illinois. An all-star athlete, Jordan played football, baseball, and basketball at his alma mater, Emsley A. Laney High. Despite his legendary professional basketball career, Jordan failed to make the varsity team during his sophomore year. Any person that has ever tried out for high school sports and failed to make the team has heard this anecdote from their parents, although I imagine it provides for little comfort. After mentally and physically dedicating himself to learning the craft of basketball mechanics, Jordan quickly became the star of his junior varsity team, and a few years later found himself as the starting shooting guard of the North Carolina Tarheels.

Set against the backdrop of American History, 1984 was a tumultuous year to say the least. The crack epidemic was on the rise in poverty-stricken cities, the national debt was at an all-high time, and Avril Lavigne was being born. Not to mention, George Orwell had long ago prophesized that this would be the year that mankind would be completely enslaved by a terrorist regime known as Big Brother. Chaos was on the rise, and complete anarchy was just around the corner. Upon the 1984 NBA Draft, Jordan was a top prospect in a pool of future legends such as Charles Barkley, Hakeem Olajuwan, and John Stockton. During his NCAA days at North Carolina, he had averaged close to 20 points a game with a staggeringly high 54% completion percentage, while managing to hit the game winning shot in the 1982 NCAA championship game.

After a dismal 1983 season, the Houston Rockets contained the first pick in the draft. Hakeem Olajuwan, a 6’10 Center from Nigeria and future hall-of-famer, seemed like the sure-fire pick for many professional NBA analysts, recruits, and general managers across the board.

The second pick belonged to the Portland Trailblazers, and they decided to draft Sam Bowie, the injury-laden college phenomenon from Kentucky. Not long after, Bowie would forever be married to an unfortunate legacy. A quick comparison of the respective careers of Sam Bowie and Michael Jordan are equal parts laughable and depressing. After playing in 76 games during his rookie season and averaging decent numbers, Bowie’s injuries got the best of him, and he only participated in 63 games over the next four seasons. Both ESPN and *Sports Illustrated*, along with a million other sports’ fans, have labeled the drafting of Sam Bowie as the worst decision in sports history.

The Chicago Bulls contained the third pick in the draft. Jordan did not attend the draft, as he was preparing for the 1984 Olympic games that he was asked to apart of. Retrospective glances at the drafting, courtesy of Youtube, are in short, hilarious. The television commentators maintain a pastoral air, completely unaware that the greatest professional athlete of any sport had just been drafted.

Headed by Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen, the former University of Central Arkansas forward, the Chicago Bulls would go on to have a legacy in basketball that cannot be accurately described by any of the current words in the Webster’s dictionary (I looked). The Bulls would bring six championships to their city, posting dominant numbers along the way in the regular season. The somehow enduring Jordan vs. Lebron argument is ludicrous at best. My arithmetic skills are far from average, but to my count Lebron James has won zero championship rings in his career. Usually, heated debates with my pre-teen cousins about this very issue usually culminate in the tight rolling of newspapers, and unsuccessful attempts to beat some sense into their adolescent brains.

It did not take long for Nike to capitalize on the star power. In 1985, the company released the first Air Jordan shoe. It would be the only pair of Jordans to display that lovable Nike checkmark. The NBA has long been a harsh dictatorship, and recently well-respected sports analysts such as Bryant Gumbel, host of Real Sports on HBO, have likened the league to a modern day slave operation. Before Jordan, the act of a player wearing their own customized shoes was unheard of due to extremely outdated practices. The league had long demanded that all players wear white shoes, regardless of their personal preference. Jordan elected to wear his black and red shoes, and only had to forfeit 5,000 dollars in fines per game, leading to Jordan sneakerheads (a term universally used to describe Jordan shoe collectors) to affectionately refer to them as the “Banned” Jordans. The ones that birthed the madness.

In 2007, the Jordan 1s were reissued to the masses in a special two-for-one deal. If you wanted to spend $200, you could get two pairs, the original red, white, and black shoes along with a special yellow and black pair. I remember the morning I bought these, tensions were high, and for some reason I found myself in an argument with one of the employees at Foot Locker. I can’t really remember the details of the exchange, but with newfound knowledge of the law garnered from my AP Government class, I threatened the employee and manager with every civil suit I could think of. My efforts and tantrums were met with two police officers, who gently escorted me out of the store.

Bruce Kilgore designed the second Air Jordan shoe, the first not to feature the Nike swoosh symbol, and all subsequent Air Jordan sneakers would follow suit. Although Kilgore has long abstained from interviews and the act of volunteering information about himself, his contributions to fashion cannot be denied. Kilgore also designed the popular Air Jordan shoe, which, in an effort to refrain from prejudice but also to remain objective, every African American male is required to have at least one pair of Air Force One’s in their sneaker arsenal. In fact, contracts are signed upon birth that such demands will be met (after the cutting of the umbilical cord of course, after all we are not savages.) You may remember, if the fortunate powers of selective memory have not befallen you, that the once relevant rapper Nelly had a smash single with the hit “Air Force Ones.”

However, Tinker Hatfield, the in-house designer for Nike, is the name other than the player himself most synonymous with the Jordan sneaker. A former high school and collegiate sports star from Linn County, Oregon, Hatfield has designed almost all of the Jordan sneakers, and in 1998 was named by Forbes Magazine as one of the 100 Most Influential Designers of the 20th century. In my honest, and probably deluded opinion, Hatfield’s artistic accomplishments can only be rivaled by those of Michelangelo and Da Vinci. My numerous ponderings of Hatfield are mixed with both awe and derision. On one hand, he is responsible for some of the most beautiful things known to man. On the other, he is also somewhat responsible for the constant emptying of my wallet.

During 1987, in his second appearance at the annual NBA Dunk Contest, Jordan would stun crowds and his peers with an inconceivable amount of style. As the crowd became more involved in the festivities, the level of intricacy and finesse in Jordan’s dunks progressively followed suit. Jordan’s final dunk of the contest, one in which he soared through the air from the free-throw line was a fitting climax to a historic night in basketball. The iconic, larger-than-life image (an image that defies the logic of a photoshop-less era) of Jordan flying through the air with legs outstreched would be crystalized on all subsequent Jordan sneakers, an image most striking on the Jordan 5. According to Hatfield, the impetus behind the sneaker’s legendary design was inspired by the World War 2 P-51 Mustang Fighter Plane. Often times I have spent hours staring dreamily at photographs of the Jordan 5, as if in a museum contemplating the brush strokes of a Vincent Van Gogh painting. This is the mecca of the Jordan sneaker. I am ashamed to say, that if the opportunity ever presented itself, I would, without much thought at all, gladly part ways with my left nut in order to acquire a pair.

In his essay, “Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire”, the eminent journalist Michael Eric Dyson theorizes about the effect Jordan has had on popular culture: “Jordan stands at the breach between perception and intuition, his cultural meaning perennially deferred from closure because his career symbolizes possibility itself, gathering into its unfolding narrative the shattered remnants of previous incarnations of fame and yet transcending their reach.”

Being that they are basketball shoes, sports tropes appropriately align themselves well with the collective Jordan sneakerhead philosophy. Although Jordans are no doubt products of the gods, each pair still contains an Achilles’ Heel. Only a year after I purchased the Jordan 1’s, I had the unfortunate of luck of finding myself caught in a field during a sudden and violent rainstorm. After hours upon hours of scrubbing with overpriced sneaker cleaner, and House-like methods to save them, my sneakers died on the operating table, the heal finally giving way to the layer of mud firmly attached to them. To soften the blow of such calamities, most Jordan sneakerheads will have a starting rotation of sneakers in their respective arsenals, with pairs lined up just in case one of the starters goes down due to injury. Injury has a wide and varied meaning here: unexpected mudding, scuffed, stolen, etc. This amounts to six or seven pairs of shoes, and this is only the minimum requirement.

The act of inflicting injury on another person for a pair of shoes is atrocious, despicable, disgusting, and every other adjective you can think of. If you are going to stab or kill a person, make sure you are doing so for the right reasons— like a pair of Jordan 5s.

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Jordan retired for the second time of his career in the early part of 1999. Not long after I started watching professional basketball games more intently, beginning a lifelong obsession that has led to many a missed homework assignment in my academic career. In 2001, Jordan announced that he would return to professional basketball with the Washington Wizards, a decision that was met with much criticism by NBA analysts and fans alike that feared an aging Jodan would tarnish his basketball legacy. Nevertheless, Nike decided to capitalize on his return and to cash in on it, charging $200 for the Jordan 17s. The shoe was not only designed with grade-A technology to provide comfort, the shoes also came equipped with a compact disc of “The Jordan Song” and a brief case.

My acclimation with matters pertaining to the opposite sex came later than many. At age 12, I had yet to develop my unhealthy obsession with Air Jordans, but this would all change during what I thought would be an ordinary day of school. Kevin, a neighborhood friend of mine had just gotten off the bus when we witnessed Maria, the prettiest girl in school, smiling and standing much too close to the pimply-faced Marcos. Marcos was far from a ladies man, so of course the whole situation made little sense to me. Once I inched further, I could see that Marcos was holding a shiny black brief case, and Maria was peering inside. Obviously, I thought, this is what the nice-smelling, long-haired creatures with protrusions in their chest area wanted. Without saying anything, Tom and I gave each other a slight head nod, and took a lasting mental note.

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Spike Lee, legendary film maker of such movies as *Do the Right Thing, Malcolm X, and Inside Man*, is a central figure in Air Jordan folklore. Lee’s career in the public eye, in euphemistic terms, has had its share of controversy. Just to name a few instances of many (like public feuds with Clint Eastwood), in the 1994 NBA Eastern Conference finals between the New York Knicks (Lee’s favorite team) and Indiana Pacers, Lee taunted future hall-of-famer Reggie Miller by making choking gestures with his hands. Miller responded by scoring 25 points in the fourth quarter alone. The following day, the New York Daily News headline read “Thanks A Lot Spike.”

During his long career in the spotlight, when not throwing public tantrums at old men, or making choking gestures at NBA games, or directing movies, Lee has been promoting Jordan shoes. Mars Blackmon, a fictional character from Lee’s 1986 film *She’s Gotta Have It* played by the director himself, was resurrected in the late 80’s and early 90’s as a part of Nike’s promotional surge to push Air Jordans on the market. In these commercials, Jordan towers above the two foot tall Lee while the director uses his famous charm and wit to play off Jordan’s cooler-than-life persona. In the last decade, Nike awarded Lee with his own brand of Jordan shoes. Each edition a mixture of two Jordan styles, the sneakers are appropriately titled Spiz’ikes.

The temptation to wax poetically about the historic significance of the Jordan shoe is heavy. I could with some effort equate my lust for Jordan shoes to some lofty Dickensonian theory about morality, or rather, state that the tinges of red in Jordan sneakers symbolize Marcos’ red pimply face and my belief in the impossible coming to fruition, but in actuality, my sentiments mirror the unapologetic ones of Spike Lee when he was questioned about his materialistic devotion to Nike Sneakers, a company famous for its less-than-stellar treatment of overseas employees.

“I just like the shoes,” Lee said.

Non-sports fan cannot seem to fathom the concept of sports fandom and player glorification. For instance, the average woman cannot understand why news of impending economic doom is more prescient to men than the act of their team losing a crucial game, the latter scenario can cause a wide range of symptoms depending on the level of criticality involved with said game: Despite two championship wins since, the 2008 loss the Lakers suffered to the Boston Celtics in the championship series still causes pangs in my side that will likely never cease.

Kobe Bryant is my favorite basketball player of all time. I can still remember the day he was drafted in 1996. My Father was a Lakers fan, so naturally I became one as well. In a controversial move, which was a firestorm in the media at the time, Bryant would not be drafted to the Charlotte Hornets, even though he was by right their choice to make. However, after practicing with the Lakers, and with news of Shaq coming from Orlando to the Lakers, Kobe made it known that he would play for no other team but LA. At five, Kobe is one shy of Jordan’s championship ring total (just to reiterate, Lebron James has zero).

At age seven, Kobe Bryant was larger than life to me. He was a high school basketball player, and some analysts were saying that he had enough potential to make a huge mark on the game. But his celebrity star status enthralled me, and I remember asking my dad every question I could about this mysterious Kobe Bryant. In the intervening years I have supported Kobe through thick and thin, through raping of teams and alleged rapes of females. Now that I’m older, the larger-than-life grandiosity that I once looked to him as somewhat vanished, but I still consider him a mythical being.

Why do we assign such importance to sports stars? These are people we have never met, and don’t know much anything about, aside from what we learn from mundane interview soundbites and Wikipedia entries. Additionally, most of these players have been involved with very sketchy activity in their lives. The question is one I hoped to find the answers to in the writing of this essay, as in some self-realizing confession, but I fear I have failed in this regard.

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In early January of this year, the Jordan 10s were released. As evidenced by Twitter, the hype for the shoes was out of control. The 10s are some of the worst Jordans ever designed, with nothing at all interesting or unique about them. I had had it. I was not going to purchase these Jordans. I finally put my foot down.

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I had a lot of time to think while I drove home from the mall next morning after purchasing the 10s. Obviously, these shoes had and continue to have some unhealthy hold on my soul.

While at the Champs store that day, I overheard a tragic story from a customer. Apparently, he had the wise idea to leave his brand new Jordan 11s in his car, and they were stolen. I received this story not meant for me in the first place with both sympathy and derision. Stealing Jordans is a crime only fit for Hitler to punish, but the fact a person would leave a brand new pair of Jordans in the car is shocking to me. Great men in the 1700s and 1800s had foresight for such matters, and that is why they developed the modern lock and key system. I theorize that in their dreams at night, they saw vicious creatures with Red Bull stained teeth, and greedy arms outstretched, sniffling around night-time parking lots in search of Air Jordans. I thank them for their efforts.

I wish to impart this wisdom to any unfortunate individual who reads this essay, somehow becomes inspired, and takes up the destructive path of Jordan sneaker collecting. On those Saturday mornings when you are waiting outside the mall, the best demeanor to maintain is one of indifference: hands in pockets, back straight, and a Gaga-esque poker face worn at all times. It is also best to wear a shabby outfit instead of an expensive one. Sweatpants with holes in them is perfect. You do not want people to know that you are preparing to drop a disgusting amount of money on a pair of shoes.

As I finish this essay, I must note that I was recently informed that the highly anticipated Jordan 4s are coming out in February. It goes without saying, that I have been training on the speed and heavy bags, sharpening my knives, loading my shotguns, and drawing up blueprints up every aspect of the Park Plaza Mall Center. If I leave the Mall without those shoes that day, I will be resting comfortably in a body bag.

What I have just admitted is the main reason why I decided to write the essay, and the main reason that I feel me and God have some catching up to do.